

JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN PRE-ISLAMIC YEMEN

(Alfred F.L. BEESTON)

The epigraphic material in Sabaic language, which must be our primary source, contains no hint of Christianity in Yemen before the sixth century A.D., as has been said in the previous article. External literary sources for the fourth-fifth centuries are moreover meagre and unsatisfactory. The first notice comes in the Byzantine historian Philostorgius ⁽¹⁾, writing in the early fifth century. He says that the emperor Constantius II (337-361) sent ambassadors, accompanied by a certain Theophilus (subsequently consecrated bishop) to the ruler of the Himyarites, inviting him to become a Christian and to build a church for the use of visiting Byzantines « and any others who might incline towards Christianity » ; the ambassadors carried lavish gifts and a subvention for the cost of building the church. It is alleged that the Himyarite ruler did accept Christianity and built – out of his own funds and not with the imperial subvention – not one but three churches : one in the Himyarite capital of Zafar, one in Aden, and one on the coast further east. Since Philostorgius and Constantius were both Arians, it is certain that any Christianity implanted as a result of this embassy would have been Arian in character. However, it is unlikely that this made any lasting impression, or even much at the time. The location of the three churches indicates that they were primarily intended for the purpose stated by the emperor, namely the convenience of visiting Byzantines, more than for native Christians. As for the ruler himself, confronted with an embassy of this kind, he can hardly have done otherwise than pay some lip-service to Christianity, but not necessarily with any real conviction ; on the possible ambivalency of his position. see the preceding article (p.268).

The next source is a Nestorian one, the so-called « Chronicle of Seert » ⁽²⁾, of the early eleventh century (with some later chronicles

(1) *Kirchengeschichte*, herausg. von J. Bidez (*Griechische christliche Schriftsteller* 21) Leipzig, 1913, III, § 4.

(2) *Histoire nestorienne, Chronique de Seert*, ed. A. Scher (*Patrologia Orientalis*, 5) 1911, chap. 73, 330-1.

which depend on it). According to this, Christianity was first introduced into Najran in the early fifth century by a Najranite who had been converted while on a visit to Hira, and from some converts in Najran the faith was carried among their neighbours the Himyarites. This account makes only modest claims: nothing is said about conversion of the rulers, and the impression on gets is that Christianity both in Najran and among the Himyarites remained confined at that period to a small minority.

A Geez hagiographical document of unknown authorship ⁽³⁾ asserts that Christianity was first introduced into Najran by a certain Azqir, who was subsequently martyred by a Himyarite king named (in the source) « Sarabḥel Dankef ». The particular interest here is that the name is recognisable as an easy corruption of the epigraphically attested king Shuraḥ bi'il Yankaf ⁽⁴⁾, reigning shortly after the middle of the fifth century, since he appears in an inscription dated 582 of the Himyarite era (467/472) ⁽⁵⁾. From this meagre notice, one cannot deduce that Christianity at that period was professed in Yemen by more than perhaps a few isolated individuals.

Muslim Arabic accounts attributing the first appearance of Christianity in Najran to « Phemion » or 'Abdallah b. Thâmir ⁽⁶⁾ are unhelpful because they contain no indication of chronological siting.

One epigraphic text from the Yanbuq ravine in the Wadi Ḥabbân is assigned by the editors ⁽⁷⁾ to the late fifth century; this has no Christian wording, and whether or not the presence of a cross at the end of the text can be taken as proving Christian affiliations is dubious.

For the sixth century the documentation, both epigraphic and literary, is relatively copious, but not always easy to interpret. The most significant epigraphic documents are a group of three inscriptions, Ry 507-8 and Ja 1028 ⁽⁸⁾, all dated in June-July of the Himyarite year 633, and mentioning a Jewish king of the Himyarites named Yusuf As'ar. Since only two years earlier a certain Ma'dikarib Ya'fur was reigning ⁽⁹⁾,

(3) H. WINCKLER, *Altorientalische Forschungen* 1, 1894, 329-36.

(4) In Ethiopic script *y* and *d* are closely similar.

(5) The date is found in CIH 537, where the king's name is mutilated, but can be restored from other texts giving his full name, e.g. RES 4969.

(6) TABARI, ed. de Goeje, I 921-4.

(7) BR-Yanbuq 10, in M. Bafaqih and C. Robin, « Inscriptions inédites de Yanbuq », *Raydan* 2, 1979, 65.

(8) G. RYCKMANS, « Inscriptions sudarabes 10^e ser. », *Muséon* 66, 1953, 285, 296-7; the renderings here given follow the interpretations of W. Caskel in *Entdeckungen in Arabien (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 30)* Köln, 1954, and remarks by J. Ryckmans, as cited by Beeston, *Orientalia* 25, 1956, 296-7. The third text, Ja 1028, is found in A. Jamme, *Sabaeen and Hasaeen Inscriptions from Saudi Arabia (Ist. di studi del Vicino Oriente, Studi semitici, 23)* Roma, 1966, 39-40; here, Jamme's rendering of the phrase 'ly ḥrb wmqrnt ngrn as « they overcame the fighters and the military units of Nagra » seems implausible, and I would read it as « in the course of the campaign and blockade of Najran » ('alā ḥarbi najrâna wa muqârana-tihâ).

(9) Ry 510, in G. RYCKMANS, *op. cit.*, 307-8.

the events detailed in the three texts of 633 appear to have been early in Yusuf's reign. The texts record activities which had extended over a period of thirteen months, and include references to the destruction of churches, described by the Greek loanword *qalīs* (from *ekklēsia*), linked with a massacre of Habashites, i.e. Abyssinians. Thus, Ry 508/2-4 (June) « they supported their lord king Yusuf As'ar against the Habashites in Zafar and destroyed the church ; and the king went down to al-Ash'âr and sent him [the author of the text] with a contingent against Mokha, and he massacred all its inhabitants and destroyed the church » ; Ry 507/4 (July) « they destroyed the church and massacred the Habashites in... [probably Zafar, though the reading is uncertain] » ; Ja 1028/3 (July) « he [the king] destroyed the church and massacred the Habashites in Zafar ». All these texts also mention Najran, but in significantly different terms. Nothing is said about destruction and massacre : in Ry 508/6,8 we read that the generals were detailed to blockade Najran while the king was organizing defensive works on the coast at the strait of Mandab against the Habashites – here of course those across the sea in Africa ; in Ry 507/6 envoys were sent to Najran « in order to demand hostages from them, otherwise war would be waged on them » ; Ja 1028/4 speaks of « the blockade of Najran and the fortification of Mandab ».

We must conclude that in this year there were already settlements of Abyssinian Christians in the Himyarite capital of Zafar and in the Red Sea coastal town of Mokha, and that early in his reign Yusuf initiated a policy of exterminating them ; in consequence of this he anticipated Aksumite retaliation from across the Red Sea, and also regarded Najran as constituting a possible threat, but had by July of that year not yet occupied Najran.

Next there is a group of undated and fragmentary texts. Ist. 7608 bis ⁽¹⁰⁾ mentions as king (with the traditional titles of a Himyarite king) a certain Simyafa' Ashwā', but also indicates that the Aksumite rulers (*negast*) exercised a superior authority : we read of « their overlords the *negast* of Aksum », « [appointment] as kings over the Himyarites and viceroys of the *negast* of Aksum », « doing service to the kings of Aksum ». The text is Christian, using the trinitarian formula « God and His Son Christ Victorious and the Holy Spirit ([*man*]*fas* or [*na*]*fs*) » ⁽¹¹⁾.

In a Geez-language inscription from Aksum ⁽¹²⁾, the Aksumite king Caleb says « (God) gave me a great name, that I might wage war against

(10) G. RYCKMANS, « Une inscription chretienne sabéenne », *Muséon* 59, 1946, 165-72.

(11) This formula is a composite one deduced from two separate passages in the text, one where « Holy Spirit » follows a lacuna, and another where « Victorious » precedes a lacuna.

(12) See A.J. DREWES, « Kaleb and Himyar », *Raydan* 1, 1978, 27-31. The text is in unvocalised Ethiopic script, but the general's name can probably be interpreted, by comparison with the Syriac from (on which see below), as something like *Hyonā* (classical Geez *h'yawnd*).

Himyar. I sent *Hyn* [...] *bn zsmr* with my troops and I founded a church in Himyar... (in) the name of the Son of God, in whom I believe ». A Geez inscription in Marib ⁽¹³⁾ contains a mention of the burning of the Sabaeen royal residence, and an allusion to a « displaced » (*s'ur*) king of the Himyarites.

In 657 Himyarite (542/547), the Sabaic inscription CIH 541 at the Marib dam shows Abraha using the traditional Himyarite royal style and claiming to have received embassies from Byzantium, Persia, Ghassan, Hira and Aksum. He employs the trinitarian formula « God and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit (*rūh*) », and refers to a church in Marib (with perhaps a small monastic community attached to it ⁽¹⁴⁾). In a small inscription apparently written by one of the workers on the Marib dam repair around this period, W.W. Müller has detected a loanword (via Syriac) from Greek *euschēmōn*, echoing a phrase of St Paul ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The literary sources are largely hagiographical, concentrating on the martyrdoms of St Aretas and his companions in Najran ; according to the Greek Martyrium Arethae ⁽¹⁶⁾ these took place in October-November 523, though I. Shahid ⁽¹⁷⁾ inclines to prefer an earlier dating in 518. The historical background tends to be somewhat cursorily treated both by the hagiographers and by the secular chroniclers. In spite, however, of some divergences in detail, a fairly consistent general narrative can be pieced together from them ; I can here only give a summary account, since a full survey (on which I am at present working) would be too long and involved for the present work. Thus :

A Jewish Himyarite king killed some Byzantine merchants who were passing through Yemen on their way to Aksum to trade. Aksumite forces commanded by someone whom the Book of the Himyarites, ch. 5 ⁽¹⁸⁾ calls *Hywn'*, thereupon invaded Yemen. The Aksumite king was at that time a pagan, but vowed to become a Christian in the event of his being victorious ; he was victorious, fulfilled his vow, and placed a Christian king on the Himyarite throns, the defeated Jewish king being either killed (according to the Pseudo-Dionysius ⁽¹⁹⁾) or forced to flee and

(13) Murad KAMIL, « An Ethiopic inscription found at Mareb », *Jnl. Sem. St.* 9, 1964, 56-7 ; and W.W. Müller, « Zwei weitere Bruchstücke der äthiopischen Inschrift aus Marib », *Neue Ephemeris f. sem. Epigr.* 1, 1972, 59-74.

(14) *mstl* ; see BEESTON, « Notes on Old South Arabian Lexicography 9 » (*Muséon* 88, 1975) 187-8.

(15) W.W. MÜLLER, « Eine paulinische Ausdrucksweise in einer spätsabäischen Inschrift » (*Raydan* 3, 1980), 75-81.

(16) J.F. BOISSONADE, *Anecdota Graeca* vol. 5, 1833, §§ 1, 20. See G.L. Huxley, « On the Greek Martyrium of the Negranites », *Proc. R. Irish Acad.* vol. 80C, n° 3, 1980, 43.

(17) *The Martyrs of Najran, new documents (Subsidia hagiographica 49)* Bruxelles, 1971, 235 ff. Since as pointed out below, 633 Himyarite (the date of Ry 507-8 and Ja 1028) was the year of the martyrdoms, acceptance of Shadid's date for these implies a base date for the Himyarite era in 115 B.C. whereas acceptance of the Martyrium date implies 110 B.C.

(18) ed. A. Moberg, Lund, 1924.

(19) *Chronicon pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, ed. J.B. Chabot, II (CSCO 104, *Scriptiores syri* 53) Louvain, 1933, 54-7, 68-9.

hide in the mountains (according to the Greek Martyrium). After some time, the Christian Himyarite king died, and his successor was either a new Jewish king (Pseudo-Dionysius) or the former one (Martyrium) who had now emerged from hiding. In this second Jewish reign, the Himyarite king massacred the Abyssinians in Zafar and burnt the church there. Apprehensive of Aksumite retaliation (see the Book of the Himyarites ch. 8, where the king says « war is nigh to breaking out against us »), he mustered his forces and called on Najran for supporting levies. The latter started out, but turned back on learning the news of the massacre in Zafar. The king then besieged Najran, without military success, but secured its capitulation by a false promise of amnesty ; once in control of the town he broke his promise and massacred the martyrs. The Aksumites again invaded, gained the victory, and killed the Jewish king. They then withdrew, having established a native Himyarite Christian named Esimiphaïos (thus Procopius) ⁽²⁰⁾ on the Himyarite throne as a vassal of Aksum. After some time, the Abyssinians settled in Yemen revolted and « shut up » Esimiphaïos in a fortress, and placed on the throne a Christian named Abram ; the latter threw off the Aksumite allegiance, but at a later time, after the death of the king who had installed Esimiphaïos, agreed to pay tribute again. On the other hand, the accounts of Pseudo-Dionysius and John Malalas ⁽²¹⁾ contain no mention of the reign of Esimiphaïos and present Abram as having been placed on the throne by Aksum immediately after the death of the Jewish persecutor of the Najranites. Malalas also has an account of an embassy sent by the emperor Justinian early in his reign to Aksum in order to induce the Aksumite king to attack Persia : the logistic possibility of this is explained by the comment that the Aksumites had defeated and killed a Himyarite king and that his successor was subject to Aksum.

Salient facts in this narrative are that there were three distinct phases of Himyarite persecution of Christians, the victims in the first case being Byzantine merchants, in the second Abyssinians settled in Yemen ⁽²²⁾, and in the third the Najranites ; and that there were two distinct Aksumite invasions of Yemen. For this reason, the statement of Cosmas Indicopleustes ⁽²³⁾ that « in the beginning of the reign of Justin » ⁽²⁴⁾ he personally witnessed Aksumite preparations for an invasion of Yemen, is less helpful than one would have hoped, since there is nothing to show whether this was the first or the second invasion ; certainly the remark is not conclusive evidence that the Najran martyrdoms must have been in 518 rather than 523.

(20) *De Bello Persico* 1, §XX.

(21) *Chronographia*, ed. Dindorf. 1829.

(22) A limited number of native Himyarite Christians and Syrian clerics are also recorded as having perished, presumably being treated as fifth-columnists ; but by far the greatest number of the victims were Abyssinians.

(23) *The Christian Topography*, book 2, § 56.

(24) Since Justin reigned 518-527, this cannot indicated any time later than say 522.

It will be noticed that on the whole the epigraphic sources can be fitted into this narrative, though with some uncertainties. The one thing that seems incontrovertible is that the inscription Ja 1028, dated 633 Himyarite, describes a situation which from the literary sources must have been a few months previous to the martyrdoms of Najran. One might also feel justified in thinking that the Aksum Geez inscription, with its reference to a commander named *Hyn*, refers to the first invasion which according to the Book of the Himyarites was conducted by *Hywn'*. The Geez text at Marib may likewise belong to the first invasion, if we accept the Martyrium version according to which the result of this was not the death, but only the flight, of the Himyarite king. The Istanbul inscription's *Simyafa'* has been generally supposed to be identical with Procopius' *Esimiphaioi* ; but J. Pirenne ⁽²⁵⁾ has suggested that he might have been (perhaps considerably) earlier. The only actual discrepancy between epigraphic and literary sources is that the former speaks of a demand for « hostages » from Najran, while the Book of the Himyarites speaks of military levies ; yet the two presentations are not necessarily incompatible, since the levies may indeed have been regarded on the Himyarite side as guarantees against hostile action.

A matter which has not, so far as I know , been hitherto discussed, is the motive for the persecution. It seems to me unlikely that this should have been pure religious fanaticism, except possibly on the part of Yusuf himself. But the support for his policy which he received from the magnates of the realm (specially the Yazanid lords) is more likely, I suggest, to have been prompted by xenophobic reaction against a possible extension of the influence of the Byzantine empire into the southern Red Sea area. This would account for the first and second phases of persecution, and the special savagery of the Najran affair would have been occasioned by what, from the Himyarite side, could be seen as treachery in the withdrawal of the levies (or hostages).

In contrast to Christianity, Judaism in the Himyarite lands is attested already in the latter part of the fourth century. An inscription from a site close to Zafar mentions as king *Dhar'i'amar Ayman*, who is known to have been reigning in 493 of the Himyarite era ⁽²⁶⁾, and its author has the characteristically Jewish name of *Yahuda*. He records the construction of his « house » (*bayt*) named *Yakrub*, « by God's favour », and with the support (*ṣilat*) of the community of Israel, and by authority of the king and the royal family ». It is significant that « community » is expressed not by a Hebrew technicality such as *qahal*, but by the purely Sabaic term *sha'b* which traditionally applied to a group of economically

(25) On palaeographic grounds ; see the discussion in J. Ryckmans, « Some Remarks on the Late Sabaean Inscriptions » (*Proc. of the first Internat. Symposium on studies in the history of Arabia*) Riyadh, 1979 [issued 1981], 61-2. The proposal is for a dating some thirty years before the death of king Yusuf ; but I would question whether palaeography can provide datings as close as this for epigraphic texts.

(26) RES 3383.

and socially interdependent villages, or to a group following a particular profession, such as the 'ily (concerned with breeding and caring for horses). Evidently by this time there was a well-established Jewish community (or communities) of some wealth and standing, fully integrated into the social structure and enjoying the patronage of the king. One may recall that in mediaeval Europe, the Jewish communities of England, Poland and Rome were under the direct protection of king or pope⁽²⁷⁾.

The supposition that king Dhar'i'amar himself was of the Jewish faith seems to me unfounded. The concluding clause of the inscription contains an aspiration « that no harm may befall the royal *makannat* of the *makrab* (named) Ahlak », but this can hardly be construed as evidence of the king being a Jew. It is true that the « house » Yakrub may well have been a *bet din* (synagogue), but Geez *mekwrah*, while it can be applied to a Jewish place of assembly, in itself means no more than « assembly », just as is the case with the Greek word *sunagôgê*. My view is that in our context *makrab* means simply a building for public assembly, having a special place (the *makannat*) in it for the king or royal representative (like the apse where the magistrate sat in a Roman hall of judgment); and that the phraseology is a tournure for « royal authority » just as the « sublime Porte » (*al-Bâb al-'âlî*) is a tournure for the authority of the Ottoman sultan⁽²⁸⁾.

Through the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth, there are no inscriptions quite so explicit as the foregoing one. But several show a perceptible Jewish influence on their phraseology: e.g. the use of *shalom* (spelt with a w)⁽²⁹⁾, and rather astonishingly « Gods (morphologically plural !) to whom (singular !) belong heaven and earth »⁽³⁰⁾ which is a manifest calque on the Hebrew pseudo-plural Elohim. Nevertheless, these texts stand out in marked contrast to the much larger body of ones displaying only the neutrally coloured Rahmanism, and I think it must be concluded that Judaism did not at any time prevail among more than a minority of the population.

Whether any of the fourth and fifth century kings can have been practising Jews is a difficult question. Epigraphic evidence in favour of it is lacking, and in the literary sources the only one of whom this is said

(27) In the case of Poland, N. DAVIES (*God's Playground, a history of Poland*, Oxford, 1981, vol. I, 130-1) writes, « The foundations of Jewish autonomy were laid under royal patronage... the principle was accepted that the elected Elders of the *kahal* or « Jewish Commune » should administer their affairs themselves. In each locality, they were to be supervised, and protected, by the royal Wojewoda or Starosta ».

(28) In MAFY Rayda 1 (C. ROBIN, *Le Pays de Hamdan*, Paris, thesis) the *makrab* is quite probably a synagogue. But I find it difficult to imagine what feature of a synagogue could have been termed « the royal *makannat* ».

(29) Robin Nag'1 and MAFY Rayda 1; in a fragmentary text Gar Framm 7 (G. GARBINI, « Frammenti epigrafici sabeï 2 », *Annali Ist. Or. Napoli* 33, 1973, 590) there is a mention of Israel. See C. ROBIN, « Judaïsme et Christianisme en Arabie du Sud » (*Proc. Seminar for Arabian St.*, 10) 1980, 88.

(30) Ry 508 (reference in note 8 above).

is Abukarib As'ad, famous in Arab traditions ⁽³¹⁾. Ṭabari has an account of his « conversion » by two propagandists from Yathrib, and of how, after a picturesque folklore story of a sort of « ordeal by fire », he persuaded his folk to follow him ; Ṭabari concludes with his editorial comment « This was the beginning of Judaism in Yemen » ⁽³²⁾. Yet, curiously, the actual narrative nowhere uses the explicit term « Judaism », but speaks only of « their faith » and « his faith » ; could it not be that the original story related to the abandonment of polytheism in favour of monotheistic Rahmanism (in the latter half of the fourth century), rather than to a full commitment to Judaism ?

[N.B. CIH = Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, pars quarta, inscriptiones Himyariticas continens ; RES = Répertoire d'Epigraphie Semitique]

(31) In the epigraphic sources, it is not clear whether the Abukarib As'ad mentioned in RES 3383 as reigning in 493 Himyarite is or is not to be regarded as identical with the one attested exactly fifty years later in 543 Himyarite (Ry 534, in G. RYCKMANS, « Inscriptions sudarabes 12^e sér. », *Muséon* 68, 1955, 309).

(32) TABARI ed. de Gœje, I. 901-5.